

A Conservation Strategy



Ensuring a Bright Future for Grizzly Bears in the Yellowstone Ecosystem

Background

In 1975 the grizzly was designated under the Endangered Species Act as threatened in the Lower 48 States. This designation provides for conservation of grizzly bears and the habitat they depend on. By the early 1980s, a recovery plan was developed for the six remaining grizzly ecosystems in the Lower 48 States, and the Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee was formed in 1983 to recover these populations.

Problems such as open garbage dumps in Yellowstone National Park were corrected. These efforts began to pay off in the late 1980s with a greater number of females and cubs surviving to reproduce. By 1996, a record 33 females with cubs were observed in the Yellowstone ecosystem, and the bear population there is now increasing at 4-6% per year. This increasing population has been expanding into adjacent suitable habitat areas throughout the 1990s, demonstrating that these grizzlies are well on their way to recovery.

Sustaining Recovery

To ensure sustained recovery of the grizzly bear in the Yellowstone ecosystem for generations to come, an adequate and reasonable management plan must be in place for use after this population is recovered and removed from federal protection. To that end, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the States of Montana, Wyoming and Idaho, USDA Forest Service, and National Park Service developed a draft Conservation Strategy to monitor and maintain the grizzly bear population and its habitat in the Yellowstone ecosystem after delisting. The goal of this strategy, once it is finalized by all participating agencies and implemented upon delisting, is to ensure that the grizzly bear population in Yellowstone continues at self-sustaining levels after recovery and never again becomes threatened.

The Conservation Strategy uses the best currently available scientific methods and data to ensure continued recovery of the grizzly bear in the Yellowstone ecosystem. As new and better scientific methods and data become available, they will be incorporated into this plan. The specific 9,209-square-mile Primary Conservation Area (PCA), where the Strategy applies, is identical to the Recovery Zone identified in the Recovery Plan, and is divided into 18 Bear Management Units (BMUs). The Strategy, which includes annual monitoring, will measure its success by both population-based and habitat-based criteria. Population-based criteria, which are identical to target levels required in the Recovery Plan, are:

1. At least 15 females with cubs must be maintained on a running 6-year average within the PCA and within 10 miles beyond its boundary.
2. At least 16 of 18 BMUs must be occupied by females with young at least 1 out of every 6 years, and no two adjacent BMUs can be unoccupied over any 6-year period.
3. Monitoring human-caused mortalities of grizzly bears so as to remain within appropriate mortality ranges.

In addition, under the Conservation Strategy the agencies will monitor and maintain:

4. A stable to increasing population trend.

Habitat-based criteria are a part of the Conservation Strategy. Federal land management agencies are revising their management plans to incorporate the standards specified in the final Conservation Strategy into their plans.

To help maintain these habitat- and population-based thresholds after delisting, the following actions are planned under the Conservation Strategy:

- o Movement of bears into the Yellowstone ecosystem will be monitored. If grizzly bears do not move into the Yellowstone ecosystem on their own in the next 20 years or so, additional bears would be introduced into the ecosystem from other areas to maintain necessary genetic diversity.
- o Secure habitat -- measured as areas more than 550 yards from any motorized access routes or high-use trails -- is to be maintained on public lands within each BMU. Within the PCA, no increased road access or helicopter use for resource extraction is to be allowed. No new livestock allotments are to be allowed within the PCA, and existing sheep allotments are to be phased out as the opportunity arises.
- o Four major foods -- cutthroat trout, army cutworm moths, ungulate carcasses, and whitebark pine cones -- are to be monitored to ensure adequate food sources.
- o Bear-livestock depredations inside and surrounding the PCA are to be monitored in order to direct nuisance-bear mitigation to areas of conflict.
- o Development of private land is to be monitored for human-bear conflicts, so management actions can be directed to minimize impacts. The importance of private lands to grizzly bears is to be evaluated to help prioritize the need for voluntary conservation easements and other land conservation actions.
- o Numbers of elk hunters and hunter-related bear deaths inside and around the PCA is to be monitored, so management actions can be directed to minimize impacts.

If any of these population- or habitat-based criteria fall below target levels while being managed under the Conservation Strategy, any management committee member can call for a review and further management actions. In addition, in response to a petition after delisting, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service may also undertake a formal status review to determine whether the species should be relisted as threatened or endangered.

Through the work of the Interagency Grizzly Bear Study Team, valuable population and habitat data is gathered on an ongoing basis through various research projects in Yellowstone and other ecosystems. Currently, an analytical computer model is used to measure and monitor ongoing cumulative effects on grizzly population and habitat. This tool will continue to be used after delisting, along with any other useful research and bear management techniques that are developed, to facilitate successful implementation of the Conservation Strategy and ensure the continuing health of the Yellowstone grizzly bear population and its habitat.

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